

Employability Trends and Advice

In 2015 the planning industry showed clear signs of a return to growth and the immediate future looks bright for job creation and employment opportunities. In the last twelve months (May 2015 – May 2016) there have been a total of 1821 vacancies advertised on the online RTPI [Planner Jobs Board](#) with an average of over 100 live opportunities per week.

Vacancy levels

Unsurprisingly, the area with the highest number of advertised jobs was in London (500) but there were a good number of jobs advertised in the South East (217), North West (161), East of England (217) West Midlands (165) and South West (176). Approximately 650 jobs were in the public sector and 230 across the private sector with the remainder spread across other sectors including Government agencies, other agencies and charities. Elsewhere across the UK vacancy numbers appear steady in comparison to previous years.

Key sector trends

- Interdisciplinary working – planning is becoming increasingly interconnected, with the shift towards the creation of communities. Planning authorities are increasingly integrating place making with regeneration and economic development. Local economic partnerships (LEPs) are beginning to have an impact in some English sub-regions with a more effective alignment of economic, spatial and transport planning as is happening in other parts of the UK.
- Cross fertilisation – public and private sectors are increasingly looking beyond their own borders to source talent for project implementation. Consultancies often value the detailed knowledge and stakeholder management skills demonstrated by local planning officials, and planning authorities can gain from negotiation and property skills of the private sector.

Salary levels

One [salary survey](#) showed salary up differences between council respondents and those working for consultancies or private sector employers. In 2015, three per cent of local authority staff received a three per cent or better pay rise in their last pay review, compared to 45 per cent of consultancy or private sector staff. Only one per cent of council employees received a five per cent rise or more, compared to 27 per cent of consultancy and other private sector staff.

Consultancies tend to have more choice about paying staff based on performance. The survey found that 37 per cent of consultancy or private sector respondents expect three per cent or more. According to a major recruitment agency local authorities have a pay policy that applies as a whole, so if a council goes for a 'no pay rise' policy, planners will get caught up in that.

RTPI survey of RTPI learning partners 2016

The RTPI recently undertook its annual survey of its [Learning Partners](#). Overall, the results indicate a sector experiencing growth as regeneration and development projects gather momentum. Three key findings were:

- The majority of learning partners were planning to recruit this year with a median figure of around 6 graduate opportunities per organisation.
- Interest in work based learning is growing with 70% of consultancies considering [apprenticeships](#)
- Overall, Learning Partners felt that the quality of planning graduates was good

Advice on graduate recruitment

So, not only are vacancies healthy but planning is one of the top disciplines for student employment according to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency. However, we know that an increasing number of employers (particularly local authority planning departments) cannot fill all their graduate vacancies. Recently, the RTPI careers inbox has received emails from a number of graduates who have not yet secured employment despite attending many interviews, and so it seems timely to explore the issue of graduate recruitment.

The frustration expressed here by a recent graduate is fairly representative:

“Sometimes I've been told 'my experience isn't quite what they're looking for' - it sometimes feels like they want me to have drawn up a Local Plan and gained planning permission for a 50-storey office blockshould employers be more understanding of the fact that the level of experience graduates have can be highly differential e.g. one graduate could have spent two weeks shadowing a planning consultant as they complete a proposal whilst another could have spent a month at a local authority helping decide on planning applications”.

It takes two to make a successful working relationship and, however intense and demanding be the pressures bearing down on an organisation, time should be set aside for talent development, and graduates allocated the necessary time to fulfil their potential and flourish if we are to see a strong and sustainable pipeline of future planners.

So, are employers' expectations of graduates unrealistic? Is it ever fair to discount an otherwise promising candidate because they have only a limited amount of work experience? Do planning graduates possess the broader employability skills employers look for? And what more can employers do to develop young planners?

The skills do graduates typically possess

Given the level of expertise necessary to become a Chartered Town Planner, students should graduate from university equipped with good occupational and sectoral knowledge as well as a number of 'soft' skills. This may not be enough to enable them to 'hit the ground running' because in reality graduates need to be supported by employers to undertake the APC practical experience as the final part of their education to gain full professional recognition.

The calibre of our planning graduates is very strong, as these recent student [prize winners](#) demonstrate. Furthermore, the majority of graduates will have acquired at least some work experience as part of their degree. In many schools there will be practitioner input into the degree via 'live briefs' and assessment of course work and presentations. Employability skills are embedded into a range of modules, careers fairs and networking events. Most graduates should be able to work independently, source information, undertake research and present on findings, collate and analyse data sets.

The skills that employers want

Employer needs vary and no graduate is going to possess the full spectrum of skills and knowledge that each employer requires. If the graduate has successfully undertaken a work experience placement and received a good report from the employer, then they have proven how they can benefit an organisation. Even if their experience is not directly related to the position, the application of general planning skills and the ability to gather and assess information will be just as valuable.

Every graduate, even the most outstanding candidate, will still need mentoring especially during the early stages of a new job. Every Director of Planning was once a new graduate with limited knowledge and understanding. Similarly, no graduate is going to arrive at your door "ready baked". All other things being equal – e.g. they are personable, display good communication skills, are engaging and articulate – it could seem unreasonable to reject a candidate at shortlisting stage on grounds of limited experience. Otherwise, entry level positions will continue to remain unfilled.

Employer support to help develop new graduates

There are a number of areas where an employer can support a new graduate:

- Design a well structured and clear orientation and ongoing training programme which is linked to the RTPI [APC](#). Do you want a graduate to specialise in a particular field or do you need them to gather a broad base of experience and knowledge first? Structure the programme accordingly around your business priorities.
- If the organisation is of sufficient size and has the opportunity to do so, then rotating a graduate through a range of functions (policy, management or enforcement) or departments is worth considering.
- Allocate a mentor to the new employee that is distinct from their supervisor. Again, this will assist with the [APC](#) process. This mentor should ideally be a peer, or senior person to whom they can ask for advice about professional practice and performance at work.

The importance of feedback

Every touch point with a business is a brand experience and whether you are a local authority or a consultancy you should want that experience to be a positive one. Where a candidate is unsuccessful it is good practice to provide personal feedback to the candidate – or at least offer them the opportunity to receive it – rather than

only send an automated, impersonal email or letter which may leave candidates unsure as to where they went wrong.

So, whether it was their presentation skills or lack of clear examples in response to questions, or negative, disinterested body language – let the candidate know.

How to maximise prospects of securing employment

As in so many areas of life, when it comes to employment the importance of first impressions cannot be overstated:

- a) A [CV](#) or [application form](#) is a sales pitch. When applying for a position by CV or application form make sure it is well written, succinct and designed to grab the employer's attention. CVs should be no longer than 2 pages and commence with your most recent experience. It should clearly identify the outcome of your completed tasks or responsibilities. Just listing what you have done is not sufficient. The sole purpose of a CV or application form is to get your 'foot through the door'. So, ask yourself the question: if you were in the employers shoes would the CV impress you?
- b) Link your skills closely to the role description and person specification. Be realistic: target jobs that are not specifically seeking extensive experience or are at a senior level. Do not dismiss roles that are perhaps at a lower level than you aspire to. These roles will enable you to acquire that crucial experience, from which you can launch your career. Always demonstrate your willingness to learn.
- c) The same broad principles apply in the [interview](#). Keep answers relevant and concise. Be personable and positive. No one will appoint a candidate that appears cynical or negative no matter how impressive their knowledge or track record.
- d) Don't repeat your CV or application form by rote at interview. The point of the application form/CV is to whet the appetite of the employer. Having secured the interview, ensure that you elaborate on those written examples. Some candidates also video themselves answering likely questions or delivering a presentation beforehand. This can be very useful indeed.
- e) Finally, never despair and persevere. It can, and indeed often does, take resilience and determination before you [find that first job](#).

The RTPI has more information on careers and career development for both job seekers and employers, including advice on application forms and interviews, on our online [Member benefits and support](#) section.

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